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DEPT FOR EUR/PPD AND EUR/CARC

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [KPAO](#) [AM](#)

SUBJECT: NEW CHALLENGE TO RADIO LIBERTY BROADCASTS

REF: A) YEREVAN 870 B) YEREVAN 840 C) YEREVAN 829

¶1. SUMMARY: Radio Liberty's Armenian Service is again in jeopardy, as the state radio service gave 30 days notice of its intent to pull Radio Liberty off the air. The notice implies that the reason is Radio Liberty's unpaid bills to the public radio service, which now amount to either \$76,000 (IBB calculation) or \$88,000 (GOAM calculation). Radio Liberty has operated without a contract in Armenia since February, and this appears to be the latest GOAM rationale for taking it off the air. END SUMMARY

¶2. With one challenge to Radio Liberty beaten back (reftels), a second challenge has already appeared. RFE/RL managers contacted post late July 9 with word that Armenian public radio had sent a letter advising that state radio would no longer broadcast Radio Liberty programming from August 9 (30 days notice).

¶3. We were informed last week that the International Board of Broadcasting (IBB's) contract with Armenian public radio to carry Radio Liberty lapsed February 1. IBB had presented a proposed new contract to its Armenian partners in December, but for unclear reasons, the Armenian side balked at signing it. RFE/RL told us they were unable to pay for service without a valid contract in effect. Armenian public radio has continued to carry the regular schedule of Radio Liberty programming up to the present, and RFE/RL presumed that a new contract would eventually be signed and the bills paid.

¶4. RFE/RL informed us it had been in very regular contact with the director of Armenian public radio, Armen Amiryan, about the lack of a contract. Amiryan had been unfailingly cordial with RFE/RL; he had continually assured RFE/RL that there was nothing to worry about, he just awaited authorization from his higher-ups to sign the new contract. RFE/RL told us that Amiryan understood perfectly that RFE/RL was constrained from making any kind of payment in the absence of a valid contract. Meanwhile, RFE/RL's unpaid bills to the public radio service mounted. IBB reckons the current unpaid liability (which it is prepared to pay, as soon as a valid contract is in place) at some \$76,600 (based on the latest agreed rates), though Armenian public radio assesses the amount due as \$88,300, which presumably includes a rate increase that has not been mutually agreed.

¶5. The issue of RFE/RL's non-payment for Armenian public radio's transmissions of Radio Liberty came up during the parliamentary floor debate over the draft legislative amendments that failed July 3, and was post's first inkling that a contract problem existed. Our first presumption was that this was most likely an unfounded allegation; we were surprised when RFE/RL later confirmed to us that it was accurate. RFE/RL and IBB had apparently considered this a petty administrative hang-up, not uncommon in the former Soviet Union, and had neither connected it to the draft legislation nor thought to inform Embassy Yerevan of the issue.

¶6. The actual text of the letter (e-mailed to EUR/CARC, EUR/PPD,

and USOSCE) does not explicitly link the August 9 cut-off to the non-payment, though it makes a demand for immediate payment of fee arrears.

17. COMMENT: It is not clear whether the GOAM has been stalling all along on signing the contract with an eye toward creating this leverage, or whether the original delay was indeed a matter of simple bureaucratic paralysis, now seized upon by the GOAM as a handy public relations club. We will renew our calls to relevant GOAM officials on behalf of Radio Liberty, making the point that the arrearages are entirely due to Armenian footdragging at signing the contract. This will be a challenging explanation to get across from a public diplomacy perspective, however, if the GOAM is determined to drive Radio Liberty off the air. END COMMENT.

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